Dyadic Relation and Market Transaction in an Environment of Economic Depression
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Abstract

This essay examines the significance of dyadic relationships between buyers and sellers during both peace and war times, and describes how war events affect the process of peace time dyadic trade relations. It suggests that these relationships prevail not so much in all areas of commercial encounters, but rather in those disturbed by specific social and economic settings. In looking at how market participants use these relationships to make sense of unstable political and economic conditions, this paper lays out the material context within which these social relations exist, presents descriptive and analytic data on market people contending with both the terror of an ongoing war and its immediate dangers, examines how traders and customers attempt to confer meaning on the events of their lives during difficult moments, and investigates how dyadic bonds ease socioeconomic exchange under war conditions.

Résumé

Cet article étudie la signification des relations dyadiques entre acheteurs et vendeurs au cours des périodes de guerre et de paix, et évalue l'impact de la guerre sur les relations commerciales dyadiques du temps de paix. Il révèle que ce type de relations loin d'englober l'ensemble de la vie commerciale ne concerne que certains dispositifs économiques et sociaux bien délimités. En examinant la façon dont ceux qui fréquentent le marché utilisent ces relations pour pallier l'instabilité de la situation économique et politique, l'auteur décrit les conditions concrètes de l'effectuation de ces relations. Il montre également la façon dont les vendeurs et les acheteurs sont confrontés à la guerre et à ses dangers immédiats, et examine la manière dont les marchands et les clients tentent de conférer un sens aux difficultés de leur vie quotidienne. Il met enfin l'accent sur le rôle facilitateur de ces relations dyadiques dans les échanges commerciaux en période de guerre.
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Dyadic Relation and Market Transaction in an Environment of Economic Depression*

A great deal has been written on marketing systems with dyadic relations and more generally about the commodities that flowed into these circuits of commerce. But little attention has been paid to the rather prosaic question of how personalized ties are organized during crisis moments. Such studies of bazaar economies and their internal marketing systems only indicate the importance of dyadic personalized relationships between buyers and sellers (Mintz 1961; Trager 1981). Usually referred to by the term ‘customer relationship’, they have not been shown to secure and solidify commercial channels especially in markets where formal contracts have been weakened by economic repression, population dislocation and a time of war and terror. Such ties, called *pratik* in Haiti (Mintz 1961), *suki* in Philippines (Dannhaeuser 1983) and *onibara* among the Yoruba of Nigeria (Marshall 1983), are not thus discussed as important mechanisms for manipulating competitive market situations and for easing the political and economic tension of uncertain times using credits and loans, but are explained as market relations during peaceful situations (Plattner 1983). The question of how producers and consumers survived hard times is, I think, inseparable from the wider issues of how dyadic relations are lubricated and sealed by credit and clientele ties that are in consonance

* This article is based on fieldwork I carried out in *kätäma* Asmára in the then region of Eritrea between July 1990-January 1991. As a result of its successful nationalist struggle against Ethiopian hegemony, Eritrea is at present an independent state and a member of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity. While I cannot fully flesh out here the military, political and economic dimensions of this development, the following are representative of the types of works that have been done with regards to the Ethio-Eritrean war: Bárakhat *Habta Sellasa* (1980), *Pool* (1983), *Araya* (1990), *Feseshasen* (1990), Connell (1993). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meetings of the African Studies Association in 1993. I am grateful for constructive comments and suggestions from two anonymous readers of the *Anthropological Quarterly*. The ideas expressed here represent a continuing effort to relate reciprocal dyadic ties to marketing surroundings that contextualize uncertain economic conditions.

with one another. This essay examines regular (‘amil) relationships between traders (säqqätti) and customers (‘addiiği) in the main market (‘edagga or šäq) of the city (käiına) of Asmāra in Eritrea. Rather than viewing ‘amil ties as dyadic relations existing in all arenas of trade (säqqät), it suggests that they prevail within specific social and economic contexts. In this analysis, ‘amil strategies are first examined in terms of individual market participants and the benefits they derive from such interaction. These relationships and their underlying logic are then discussed and patterns of dyadic ties are related to individual success in market performance. Finally, by looking at how market participants use ‘amil relationships to make sense of unstable economic conditions and terrorizing times, this inquiry presents descriptive and analytic data on market people coping with both the terror of an ongoing war and its immediate dangers, and examines how traders and customers attempt to confer meaning on the events of their lives in the midst of political instability and economic uncertainty.

Marketing systems are not only chains which ensure the conveyance of goods and the communication of price information and negotiations, nor merely a dyadic link between producers and consumers. They are also organizations rooted and articulated in social, economic and political settings. They offer an insight into the dynamics of discontinuities and contentions which war generates in local situations, and the ways in which these intersect with socioeconomic life for which regularity and predictability were at jeopardy. One can, therefore, focus not only on the periods of smooth functioning of market conditions, but also on moments of shifting socioeconomic and political contexts which form the watershed of changing times. Instead of looking at dyadic relations in peaceful contexts in order to illustrate a general conclusion, I pursue the reverse strategy of drawing on war time conditions and shifting links to arrive at specific dynamics of commercial circuits and highlight on how political crisis provides windows onto the issues at stake.

Producers and consumers in the midst of war must cope with both the dangerous events of war and the terror that those events bring (Otterbein 1993). Taussig (1984), when writing about the ‘culture of terror’, mentions the meanings that people make out of such situations. Similarly Suarez-Orozco (1990), who studied the ‘culture of fear’ and sought to understand responses to situations of war, suggests an underlying structure that operates psychologically and involves denial, rationalization and internalization. Others warn that such efforts ‘nihilate’ the reality of terror by defining it in terms of concepts belonging to an ethnographer’s own ‘symbolic universe’ (Chomsky 1988). Although epiphenomena can exist in the margins of the reality of war, I refuse to argue that commercial relation between buyers and sellers is compromised and internalized when there is discontinuity in cultural transmission. As Cohen (1984) rightly observed, uncertain times disrupt commercial life patterns, and traders and
customers become alienated from their own commodities and communities. Eritrean traders and their customers in käitama Asmāra market settings could not deny that homes were bombarded and demolished and trade disrupted, nor could they rationalize or internalize the effects of raging war on commercial activities. Rather they were sensitive to the time of terror as danger and death were possible to occur. My aim is to account for socially meaningful actions based on ‘amil ties among traders and customers in a war-torn market environment. I seek to describe mutual contracts or shared reciprocal rules used by buyers and sellers to construct cultural realities and appropriate interpretations during uncertain times, and attempt to establish the meaning traders and customers make of the trauma of day-to-day terror and turmoil to help themselves deal with political and economic disasters. This arises from the need to concretize and contextualize local social processes.

As in many other sub-Saharan African bazaar economies and city markets where risk is high, cash scarce and information restricted, traders and customers in the marketplace of käitama Asmāra developed basic economic alliances and long standing dyadic ties or ‘reciprocating’ relationships to impose order on uncertain political and economic environment. They imply the existence of regular transactions between traders and customers, and may also involve extension of credits (leqah) without interest (ḥarāta), ‘dashing’ concessions in amounts (quntaro), reduction in prices and exchange of reciprocal social ties. I am not saying that such relationships did not exist before, but they became more vital and increasingly pivotal during the last two decades when war began to threaten their daily lives. The establishment and maintenance of ‘amil ties and such voluntary personalized relationships is thus a common response to uncertain socioeconomic conditions that continually constraint marketing systems and threaten social life with economic and political disasters.

1. The structure of a market, measured primarily in terms of ease of entry of buyers and sellers, involves predictable market behaviours such as price negotiation based on dyadic ties and determines the efficiency of the market in distributing goods, services and information. The ‘amil model thus provides useful analytical categories which reflect the reality of market dynamics. Information about such trading practices stems primarily from fieldwork among cultivators, shepherds and shopkeepers. Observations and interviewing began with the routines of sales and purchases and extended to discussions of commercial choices and strategies, and visits to traders’ and customers’ homes and supply lines. Other than MINTZ (1961) and DAVIS (1973), the authors most familiar to anthropologists for their works on price negotiation and market transaction are TRAGER (1981) and ALEXANDER (1987).

2. The long history of commercialization in this region and across the Red Sea dates back to contacts during the ancient and medieval times. These have been complemented by Ottoman and later on by European trade on the coast dating from the sixteenth century. Colonial and postcolonial governments extracted resources from local producers primarily by manipulating the terms and conditions of trade and controlling marketing systems.
They reduce risk significantly by making transactions more predictable and controllable, if not always more acceptable, in commercial contexts. The extremely unstable and erratic economic and political conditions market traders and their customers contended with in kätäma Asmära during the period of research in 1990-91 were a constant threat to entrepreneurial endeavors and daily survival tasks. Chronic shortages and repeated acute crises created by intense political upheavals drained traders’ and customers’ resources. Yet by virtue of being from the ‘same people’ and having suffered the consequences of war together, buyers and sellers were not freed from the usual obligations of generosity and kindness to one another. Thus they were not able to manipulate the commercial transaction to their own immediate advantage and to the detriment of others. Instead, there was a social injunction where market people cared for one another and ties of kinship and friendship interfered with business interests. Moral responsibility of ‘family’, ‘community’, and ‘nationality’ diluted the problem of market hostility and transcended love, compassion, and generosity during times of economic and political uncertainty. In other words confrontation with a common enemy represented by Ethiopian military forces created some sense of Eritrean familial, communal and national unity and solidarity in dealing with times of political and economic difficulty in a bazaar market economy. The survival and risk-reducing strategies of traders and customers are thus examined in terms of how

3. Lacking many of the formal institutions that industrialized societies rely on to buffer them against unpredictable times, people in traditional societies are directly and profoundly affected by such risks, insecurities and market-based instabilities. I have appropriated CASHIDAN’S (1990) theory with some understanding of its implications. I find her concept useful and fruitful in comprehending how traders and customers perceive and deal with these difficulties in their commercial lives. Growing interest in risk and uncertainty arising from deteriorating political economy has made the new generation of models in economics especially relevant for anthropologists. Her edited book and the rich references at the end of it show how these theoretical developments have weight in enhancing our understanding of risk and reciprocity among buyers and sellers in market settings, and how price negotiation falls within the traditional definition of dyadic reciprocation.

4. For BARTH (1969) conflict and confrontation leads to some sort of unification based on common ethnic, national, linguistic and religious affiliation. It should be noted that due to uncertain economic times Asmära market traders formed regular ties with their suppliers. These producers brought their goods to particular traders in search of good prices, and each trader was supplied by a number of different producers. Producers would store their goods and sell them later if they were not sold on the day they were brought to the market. Since the marketplace is very near many villages outside Asmära city limits, traders and customers were sometimes relatives or strangers known to one another. PARRY (1991) makes an argument like mine and indicates that, although there are variations in the levels and kinds of trade, dyadic relationships involving extension of credit in the absence of ready cash are central to the organization of trade between traders and customers in constrained political and economic circumstances.
'amil ties and market conditions channeled goods and information during turbulent times, and in the ways in which dislocation of life patterns affected cultural transmission and caused a cycle of war-induced pathology of poverty.  

Ethnography of Eritrean Ethnicity and Commercial Activity

Eritrea is a heterogeneous society with diverse linguistic and religious constituencies. Although there is a vivid paucity of studies on the cultural composition of Eritrea, many Eritreans distinguish two major geographical regions based on physiography: highlands (kābāsa) and lowlands (qolla). This perception roughly coincides with the social organization and religious affiliation of the people of these two regions. The highlanders, predominantly Christian, are territorially organized sedentary agriculturalists whose land tenure systems (resti, ṣelmi and dēsa) and totemic clan or sib (enda) affiliations are central to their lives; and the lowlanders are majorly Muslim pastoral patrilineal nomads concerned with grazing and pasture lands. Indeed, as Tākhālā Maryam (1993) observed, this cleavage or dichotomy between highland and lowland, and between Christian and

5. From the very beginning, let me confess that I feel guilty of teleological reasoning since I automatically attribute logical or causal priority to the material-economic conditions that seem to isolate only traders and customers to fit the regnant difficult times in Eritrea in general and in Asmārā in particular. Yet I favour a materialist stance that awards causal priority to a deteriorating political economy. Materialism, in all its forms, is still theory, and one can not appeal to a theory to prove a hypothesis. For example, from an idealist perspective, one could reasonably argue that 'amil ties gave rise to the absence of economic competition among buyers and sellers rather than the other way around. Nevertheless, one may at least hypothesize a feedback relationship in which the 'amil ties, once formed, intensified an adaptation to political and economic constraints. Since dyadic reciprocal relations were favourable to the survival of traders and customers and reconciled their individual needs, there must have been selective pressures to retain them. Finally, I do not claim that the arguments deployed in this discussion always explain these relationships, but I hope that they at least point in this direction. In retrospect, perhaps the most salient feature of my fieldwork is the fact that it was difficult to carry out. The research effort was anchored and hampered by the intensity of the war situation and suspicion of strangers asking all kinds of endless questions. The mere mention of doing ethnography in a city caught up in war and political unrest brought about negative answers from government circles and suspicious responses from traders and customers themselves. At certain points interviewing buyers and sellers became a futile exercise. Yet the fieldwork was planned in detail, consultants were reached through negotiated entrances to traders' niches and customers' visits to markets, and I used their point of view to portray their commercial lives. I define and describe these entrepreneurial engagements within the context of war-induced political confrontation and economic stagnation.

6. While Mätahit is a geographic nomenclature that only stands for the western lowlands. Bahri is a seasonal retreat for highlanders in the eastern lowlands.
Eritrea's provinces and towns.
Muslim respectively sounds simplistic. There is a great deal of ethnic, religious and linguistic fluidity within these two divisions of Eritrean society. Since the ethnic, religious and linguistic divisions in Eritrea overlap and intersect, the physical and cultural maps of the country follow arrangements that exhibit complex diversity.

With an area of about 46,000 square miles and with a population of more than 3.6 million people, Eritrea, despite its small size, is in fact made up of four geographical regions bordered in the north and west by the Sudan, in the south by Ethiopia and Djibouti, and in the east by the Red Sea. These comprise of the northern hills, the central plateau, the eastern plains, and the western plains. The northern hills, divided into Sahel in the north and Sänhit in the south, consist of the major towns of Naqfa and Käran, respectively. The central plateau (käbäsa) is made up of settled agriculturalists in Hamasen, Akkäla Guzay and Särayä. Although the central plateau represents only one-fourth of the total land area of Eritrea, it is inhabited by about fifty percent of the total Eritrean population. Several of the principal urban centres of Eritrea—including Asmära and the outskirts of May Tämäñay, Mehram Čera, Qähawta and Zeban Senqäy (with an estimated population of 357,000 at the time of research), Däqqämharä, ‘Addi Qäyyeh, Mändäfära and ‘Addi Khwala—are located in this region. Barka, home of the Gaš and Sätit rivers, makes much of the western plains agriculturally the richest region in the country. Tässänäy, Baräntu and Aqurdät are some of its major towns. The northern half of the eastern plains, which extend along the Red Sea coast and are divided into north (Sahel) and south (Sämhar) by a narrow escarpment around the port of Massawa, are thinly populated. The port of Asab is found in the southern section of the eastern plains, namely the Danakil coastal lands.

As nine language groups in Eritrea crosscut these four physiographic divisions, ethnicity in Eritrea can be described according to linguistic affinity.7 The Tegreñña of Eritrea who call themselves and their language by the same name mostly inhabit the käbäsa area. Derived from Geez, now largely a language of liturgy, Tegreñña broadly belongs to the Semitic cluster of Afro-Asiatic languages (Hetzron 1972). Its speakers are pre-dominantly peasant agriculturalists whose faith is associated with an Orthodox Christian majority, and a Protestant and Catholic minority. Although the Tegreñña share a common language, religion and world view in käbäsa, there is also a sizeable Tegreñña-speaking highland Muslim minority known as Jäbärti engaged in crafts and commercial activity. Together

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7. For the last three decades no serious systematic fieldwork or ethnographic report has been done on all Eritrean ethnic groups due to wartimes. Because Eritrea is a creation of European colonization, some of its ethnic and linguistic groups cross its frontiers into the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Djibouti and identify themselves with other ethnic groups of their own kind either in search of pasture lands or favourable economic and political conditions of the times.
with the Tegreña and Amharic-speaking Christian and Muslim highlanders in Ethiopia the Tegreña of Eritrea share a common supraethnic designation known as Habaša.8

The foothills of the central plateau, particularly in Akkälä Guzay and parts of Sārayā, are also inhabited by a relatively small ethnic group called the Saho. The largest Saho-speaking Muslim groups are the Ásawurta and the Torā, while the Irob, who seasonally migrate back and forth from the Red Sea Coast to the central plateau and as far south as the Ágamā plateau in northern Ethiopia, are Saho-speaking Christians. In recent times the Saho, who are predominantly seminomadic pastoralists, have spread into the southern and northern hills of Sämhar and Sāhel (Lewis 1955). Like Āffar and Somali, Saho is a Cushitic language.

The Tegrā, who are ethnically and culturally different from the Tegré or Tegrayans of northern Ethiopia and the Tegreña of Eritrea but broadly belong to the same linguistic group as the latter, are majorly made up of the Mānsā, Marya, Bēt Asgādā, Bēt Juq and a number of other Sahil and Sāmhar cluster of communities who speak the same language (Hetzron 1972). The Mānsā are predominantly Christian cultivators, while the Muslim Marya are seminomadic pastoralists. Both the Bēt Asgādā and Bēt Juq are relatively small Muslim groups who practice agriculture (Shack 1974).

The Bilān or Bilin, who call their language by the same name, are a distinct ethnic group practicing agriculture. They inhabit the area of Sānhīt, also known as Bogos, and speak a Cushitic language classified as Northern Agaw (Thompson 1976; Appleyard 1988). As neighbours of the Tegrā, the Bilān speak the language of the former with an impeccable command. At present the Bilān are by and large Muslims with some Catholic and Protestant mission converts in their midst. In the coastal areas of Sāhel and Sāmhar one finds a recently established Bedouin Yemeni-Arab migrants known as Rashaayda. They are nomadic pastoralists and traders whose grazing grounds and commercial networks stretch as far north as Tokkar and Suakin in the Sudan (Young 1988). On the Eritrean side, particularly in the area around Massawa, Rashaayda society is undergoing tremendous transformation. Wealthy Rashiidi entrepreneurs do not any longer ride camels but cruise around with Toyota and Nissan pick-up trucks, and few even own houses installed with satellite dishes.

The only Eritrean Nilo-Saharan ethnic groups who speak Nilotic languages similar to those of the Anuak and Majangir of western Ethiopia, and Nuer and Dinka of southeastern Sudan (Bender 1975) are the sedentary

8. South Arabian inscriptions do use the word ‘Habāšāt’ to refer to Aksumite Ethiopia, and later Arab writers consistently use ‘Habāša’ for both Christian and Muslim highlanders on this side of the Red Sea. European equivalents of the term such as ‘Abyssinian’ come to be used with increasing frequency from the thirteenth century onwards. For detail see LÉVISE (1974) and MNSRO-HAY (1991).
agricultural peoples of Mätähit known as the Kunama and Nara. The Nara who are by and large Muslims are found entirely in Eritrea, but the Kunama who are made up of Christians, Muslims, and some animists have in recent times also spread into Tigray and Bägé Meder regions of northern Ethiopia.

The Beni Ámer are a relatively large ethnic group inhabiting the plains and hills of northwestern and southwestern Barka in Mätähit and the northern hills of Sänhhit. Together with the Hadendowa, Besharin, Amarar and other small groups they fall under a larger group of Muslim pastoral people known as Beja (Paul 1954; Mack 1986). While the Beni Ámer are the only Beja group who graze their herds in northeastern Saḥel and Sänhit as well as Mätähit in Eritrea, the rest of the Beja groups are all found in northeastern Sudan. The Beni Ámer of Eritrea who consist of several loosely federated subgroups—such as the Ḥedarib—are mostly bilingual, speaking both Tegrä and a north Cushitic language known as To Bedawé (Nadel 1944; Mack 1986).

The Áffar who call their language by the same name are, like the Saho and Somali, Cushitic-speaking nomadic pastoralists organized into clan and lineage groups, and kinship-based political leadership (Lewis 1955; Bliese 1976). Like the Somali but not the Saho, the Áffar share a common religion; and as pastoral nomads herding cattle, camels and goats in arid lands they tend to migrate deep into the escarpment of the eastern lowlands in search of water and grazing lands. They inhabit the Danakil coastal fringes of Eritrea where they are locally known as Dänkül; the eastern Ethiopian lowlands of Tigray where they are called Ṭälṭal; the eastern lowlands of Wältlo and Säwa where they are known as Adal; the eastern lowlands of Hararghé and the north and central lowlands of Djibouti where they are called Áffar and occupy contiguous lands with the ‘Isa Somali. By and large the ‘Áffar Triangle’ stretches from the southern edge of the Danakil lowlands in Eritrea to the eastern escarpment of the eastern plateau of Ethiopia and the north-central lowlands of Djibouti.

The development of trade between the interior and the Red Sea coast and the resultant increase in wealth in the neighbouring highlands had early on led to the rise of commercial centres such as Massawa, Monkullo, Humtublo, Hergigo, Asmära, Debarawa and Degsa. As early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it is possible to follow the fortunes of these and other trade centres using the accounts and documents of Arab geographers and European missionaries and travellers (Basset 1882; Crawford 1958). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries commercial activity acquires enhanced clarity due to the existence of writings of numerous European travellers (Bruce 1790).

Because of their position on major trade routes to and from the Red Sea coast to the interior, commercial centres such as Debarawa, Degsa and Asmära created considerable demand for goods and services and
attracted the attention of foreign travellers. Though still a flourishing political and commercial centre during the sixteenth century Debarawa was, by the early decades of the seventeenth century, beginning to be overshadowed by the Tigrayan town of Adwa (Ludolf 1684). By the nineteenth century Debarawa is described simply as a large village and thereafter it attracted the scantiest attention from foreign observers (Lefebvre 1845).

Degsa, which, like Debarawa, stood on the trade route from the coast to the interior, also enjoyed some commercial importance during the sixteenth century (Beckingham & Huntingford 1954). Located some 40 kilometres east of Debarawa and about 70 kilometres south of Asmära, Degsa is also well referred to as a major commercial centre by the Scottish traveller James Bruce during the eighteenth century (Bruce 1790). This was also the period when Sāazzäga and Hazzäga flourished not so much as commercial centres but as administrative posts (Kolmodin 1912-15). By the beginning of the nineteenth century Degsa, because of its position on the trade route to the coast, still had some economic importance to traders of the interior (Lefebvre 1845).

Asmära too, like Degsa, stood on the trade route from the coast to the hinterland. Situated on a plateau some 30 kilometres north of Debarawa and about 115 kilometres from Massawa, Asmära existed as some kind of settlement beginning at least in the fifteenth century. Though written records of the area in early times are lacking it is noteworthy that Asmära is well mentioned and cited in several accounts between 1410-1530 (Ludolf 1684). Definitely, Asmära was well known to the Portuguese Jesuits of the seventeenth century (Beckingham & Huntingford 1954). A brief mention about the location of Asmära during the eighteenth century is also made by Kolmodin (1912-15).

During the early nineteenth century Asmära was a modest commercial centre with a population of about 5,000 people. By the 1860s, Asmära was a sizeable settlement that attracted not only local traders but also foreign merchants such as Indians, Yemenis, and some Greeks and Armenians (De Cosson 1877). In the early 1870s, because of its proximity to the coast, Asmära suffered heavily from the incursions of the Egyptians who were by then well established at Massawa. This became a prelude to the events that led to the battles of Gura’re and Gundät in 1875 and 1876 respectively. Asmära’s strategic significance was soon enhanced by the Italian occupation of Massawa in 1885. There are sufficient travellers’ accounts that describe that the Asmära market’s commercial activities during this period involved trade in commodities such as grains, vegetables, textiles, sugar, salt and butter (Portal 1892).

Asmära was occupied by the Italian forces under Baldissera in 1889 and was made the colonial capital by its first governor, Martini, in 1892 (Lauribar 1898). The coming of the Italians resulted in the infrastructural transformation of Asmära. Early on, the principal zone of Italian settle-
ment lay to the southwest of the capital while the indigenous people lived in its northwest section, known later on as Hadamu or Arbà täsmära. There are ample accounts that by the end of the nineteenth century Asmära had a well established daily market of grains, vegetables, spices, wood and poultry (Saint-Ives 1899). By 1898 bazaar booths run by Yemeni, Egyptian and Greek merchants existed in essentially indigenous quarters, and the main market for livestock, which predated Italian times, by then conducted trade in mules, horses, donkeys, cattle, sheep and goats (Haneuse 1893). Rebuilt by the Italians in the form of an enclosed and walled market this sector of the city today still serves the same purpose and is called Edaga Hamus (‘Thursday market’).

Italian buildings erected during the initial decades of the occupation included the governor’s palace, and the residences and offices of the colony’s secretary and commander of the military. There were also a number of dwellings, more or less of the same model, for other officers. The Roman Catholic Cathedral which at present forms part of the centre of the city was probably built at about the same time. Other structures put up during these same decades included the post and telegraph office, the bank, the court of law, the hospital, the carabinieri barracks, the officer’s club, the central prison, several small cafes, restaurants, workshops, hotels, bars, schools, as well as many askari or indigenous troops’ camps (Martini 1935).

West of the governor’s palace Baldissera built a fort which was long to be known by his name and later on only as forto. This fortress, which was erected on one of the hills of Bét Mäkha’ë, was surrounded by strong stone walls protected at angles by cannons. Nearby the main fort were officers’ quarters, which later became part of a psychiatric hospital, lodgings for a company of Italian troops, an ammunition magazine and arsenal, all protected by a large wall and a series of block-houses (Marescalchi 1935). In sum, this was the sector of the colonial capital where the Italians kept their provisions and ammunitions for war. The settlements that grew and evolved around their garrison of army corps of engineers and artillery behind forto eventually came to be locally known as villaggio genio and attälläreya, obviously a corruption of the Italian word artilleria. Several of these structures still exist even today.

Though much of old Asmära was still in evidence at the turn of the century, the settlement had greatly changed in other ways, for it was imbued, as some travellers saw, by an unmistakable European colonial atmosphere (Wylde 1901). An Italian business quarter was coming into existence around the turn of the century where numerous blocks of stone houses were quickly replacing less pretentious structures. Roads were built in many directions; the construction of culverts over waterways and bridges over streams were also reported by some travellers (Powell 1925). By about the same time Asmära’s population was estimated at about 8,000 indigenous inhabitants, with some 1,400 resident Europeans, of whom
most were Italians. While its water supply was improved by the digging of a number of wells, its commercial networks had also grown significantly by the turn of the century (ibid.). As a colonial capital Asmāra soon acquired a racist character. Legal zonal segregation was established by an Italian decree in 1916. According to this decree the city was divided into four zones: 1) a zone reserved exclusively for Europeans; 2) a zone for Europeans and colonial assimilated subjects, some of whom were in the capacity of servants with special authorization to live there; 3) a zone for the indigenous population; and 4) a zone for buildings of industrial use (Martini 1935). Asmāra residents were by and large required to produce inexpensive raw materials for Italian industry, to work for Italian enterprises as cheap labourers, and to serve in Italy’s colonial army as a low-paid infantry. In sum they remained subject to a legislation that was discriminatory.

Asmāra’s population, according to a British War Office report of 1922, was still only about 10,000, of whom 2,500 are said to have been merchants, and 1,700 foreigners mainly made up of Italians and Indians (Great Britain 1922). Official figures for 1931 put the indigenous population at about 16,000, and that of Europeans and ‘assimilated persons’ at about 4,000. The preparations for the invasion of Ethiopia and the subsequent outbreak of hostilities led to an even sharper increase, and by 1938 Asmāra had a population of no less than 98,000, about half of whom were Italians (Dugan & Lafore 1973). The Italian Minister of Colonies, Bono, who was sent to Asmāra in 1932 to investigate possibilities for the invasion of Ethiopia, found it still far from well developed. Profoundly conscious of the colonial capital’s inadequacy as the base for the proposed invasion of 1935, the Minister of the Colonies soon approved plans for the expansion of Asmāra with municipal administration, and the construction of new buildings of two or more storeys and some paved roads (Bono 1937). The single tract railway line between Massawa and Aqurdāt across Asmāra was also built about this time to facilitate the movement of Italian troops and their logistical equipments form the coast to the hinterlands (Pankhurst 1972).

During the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-1941, Asmāra pretty much remained a colonial and commercial capital for goods that came in and out through Massawa. Its central market continued to handle a large portion of the trade of the time consisting of grains, vegetables, poultry, dairy and honey under indigenous commercial paramountcy. During this same period military installations, public buildings, workshops, depots, warehouses, offices, shops, blocks of flats, villas and encampments were rapidly thrown up. The port of Massawa was linked with Asmāra by cable-ways. A network of roads was constructed to supplement the railway tracks which had formerly linked Asmāra with other centres, and modern airports were built at Asmāra and Gura’e. All this was carried out by an army of Italian officials, engineers, mechanics, artisans, professional men, and traders, who arrived in Eritrea in 1935 (Bono 1937).
Between 1941-1952 the British set about exploiting local resources and whatever was left by the Italians, and inaugurated a new commercial climate in Asmāra. They notably used Italian ingenuity and industrial legacy to manufacture soap, beer, wine, matches, metal tools, paints, leather goods, paper and glue. Among the new industries which came into existence with the British occupation were factories for the manufacture of buttons, pottery, glassware, and boots and shoes. In the city the maintenance of roads and public buildings was limited to what was essential, and commercial activity continued to spread but with limited assets (Trevaskis 1960). With the federation and subsequent annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia, Asmāra became more of a military and administrative centre, and its commercial linkage was directed mostly towards the hinterlands of Ethiopia. The end of imperial power, the establishment of military rule in the 1970s, and the declaration of a republic in the 1980s all the more escalated the conflict between Ethiopia and the armed struggle of the Eritrean people’s liberation forces, and Eritrea was soon declared a war zone. During these stringent moments the central market of Asmāra continued to handle a large part of the city’s trade ranging from grains, vegetables and dairy to sugar, spices, salt and textiles based on long-term ṣamil ties between traders and customers. Like other markets in sub-Saharan Africa it showed the vitality of entrepreneurial enterprise, the intricacy of market periodicity, the complexity of space and locality, the apparent freedom of prices, and the extravagance of colour, sound and smell of commercial activity. Yet the market was not immune from the troughs of droughts, shortage of goods, declining productive outputs, and war moments which affected Eritrea during the last three decades. How then was the Asmāra marketplace structured to allow such relationships during difficult days?

Market and Marketing

The principal kätāma Asmāra urban daily market (‘edaga or ṣuq) is relatively very large, covering some city blocks and accommodating a

9. The presence of a market often implies the existence of a market system in the modern sense of price-fixing and the application of a body of economic theory to a modern, market economy. There would be no objection to such reasoning if the term market had only one precise meaning, but this is not the case. To the economist the market is a specific institution whose rules are built on analytic structural models. To the anthropologist the market is often the ‘marketplace’, a meeting place for the transfer of goods and services from one set of hands to another, and such a marketplace is not necessarily the basis of the economic theory which economists have created. In view of such a definitional diversity it is useful to distinguish the different meanings attached to the term market, and so avoid serious mistakes in interpreting evidence of trade, money, and market elements in societies without a market system. Because anthropological
few hundred traders. Although it is the focal point of the city, no walls or gates separate it from the rest of Asmāra downtown places. Within the market, rows of permanent stalls and temporary spots are allocated to traders by the City Hall (Mazāgaja Bēt). The commodities sold represent the full range of agricultural produce grown and consumed locally. Though the market is primarily a vegetable and fruit market, a wide variety of other items are sold including grains, peas, beans and lentils, spices and condiments, incense and oils, as well as general groceries. Traders from the outskirts of Asmāra had the knowledge and contacts to transport products from nearby villages to the urban centre. Goods were constantly accompanied by owners who could therefore arrange for rapid disposals in case of some breakdowns, and the city offered immediate access to local wholesalers and retailers through brokers and other market participants. The market is open daily from early in the morning until late in the afternoon and city traders, local 'amil and non 'amil customers as well as residents from outside city limits (kābabi) flock to it and interact with one another, sometimes as much for entertainment as for testing the ground of the business environment. By about late morning, the crowd of 'amil and non 'amil customers and vendors of all sorts of goods are engaged in brisk business.

Although the market first evolved on the periphery of early settlements, subsequent growth of the surrounding areas of kātāma Asmāra had in time centralized it. Principal roads and wide alleys converged on this market and they contained some of the busiest traffic points in the city. Most of the trade units located there had central market functions and they specialized in retail rather than wholesale. Outside the suq, marked functional differentiation of economic activities hardly existed, and the market was thus functionally distinguishable from residential quarters.

Research is carried out within a wide intellectual framework. Historical and economic definition of the market and its participants has clearly had an important influence on scholarly discussion of marketing systems, although this complex issue cannot be fleshed out here. On the basis of the above analysis I use the term ‘market’ to mean the social institution of exchanges where prices or exchange equivalencies exist. ‘Marketplace’ refers to these interactions in a customary space and time, and ‘marketing’ denotes buying and selling in a market. A market can exist without being localized in a marketplace, but it is hard to imagine a marketplace without some sort of institutions governing exchanges. According to Plattner (1985), the most conventional alternative definition reserves ‘market’ to mean a capitalist market where labour is traded as a commodity. A random, short list of works which attempt to seriously investigate cultural contexts of the market domain includes Ortiz (1967) and Forman & Riegelhaupt (1970). Works of these kind, disparate though they are, are vital for the task of making sense of forms of exchange. Although mine differs from hers, I am indebted to Carol Smith's (1977) provocative formulations and insights on marketing systems.

10. This phenomenon is not unique to Eritrea. Similar observations have been made across sub-Saharan Africa. Vide Jones (1972) and Launay (1978).
As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (A. Cohen 1971; Amselle 1971), linear commercial developments occurred along major roads leading towards this market. This was a tendency to space and place staple goods, services and other trade items on main roads which carried large traffic volumes. Specialized commercial sections involved a variety of goods and services ranging from cutlery and earthenware making to basketry and footwear mending, while dispersed economic functions with fixed locations included a whole gamut of trade activities.\textsuperscript{11} Commercial operation was sometimes handled from saucers and baskets carried on shoulders or heads, and many of them were either mothers and daughters who worked to supplement the meagre incomes of their husbands or widows heading households.\textsuperscript{12}

To understand exchange functions in changing market surroundings, it is important to examine the locational patterns and concentration and dispersion of goods. Despite its relatively homogenous production place, the Asmāra ḍagga or ṣuq system had at the time of research developed a very heterogeneous structure. It varied according to how several critical market functions were divided among participants. Market systems organize such functions as assembly, classification, storage, transportation and debunking, and the market chain is structured in terms of traders that perform and provide these services to ṣamīl and non ṣamīl customers. Each urban market has distinct characteristics as a result of historical and economic factors unique to each city centre and as Robertson (1974) and Plattner (1983) have shown, traders may compete to win customers and supply them with urban market products where competing chains imply different levels and distinct types of risks.

\textsuperscript{11} Although the number of people engaged in trade and marketing was enormous, it is not as diversified or rich as that of West Africa (see references in bibliography). The Eritrean situation seems more comparable to Ethiopia and the Horn or East Africa, where most of this activity revolves around trade of items rather than the manufacture of articles. Vide Shipton (1989).

\textsuperscript{12} In a ground-breaking study Babbb (1989) documents similar developments in Peru where market women form a vital connection between producers and consumers during a period of political and economic crisis. She focuses on the daily lives and work of market women and their strategies for combining their productive and reproductive roles, and traces how mothers and daughters, sisters and wives engaged in commercial transaction react to deteriorating economic conditions. In her article Robertson (1974) addresses similar questions in Ghana. Her work highlights the socioeconomic lives of women traders in Accra. It is unique not only by virtue of its interdisciplinary methodology but through its incorporation of case studies and easily accessible life histories of women traders that give substance to theoretical formulations. The use of this historical material is specifically intended to make a point about anthropological discourse, and does not pretend to be a contribution to a historical research. Nor does it aim at comprehensiveness, or anything close to it, since that is not required for the argument I seek to make. Yet let me mention that both studies were insightful in understanding the commercial operational networks of Eritrean women marketeers.
The Asmära 'edaga or šuq operated as a central node in the concentration and distribution network of goods. In this part of kätäma Asmära, buyers and sellers tied by 'amil relationships moved in and out of the marketing system with great frequency. As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, marketing also attracted a large number of unemployed people and constituted a common source of income for these individuals. This made the market seem that business was brisk at all times. Käbabi peasants arrived in the market in the early morning and sold their produce in bulk (jimla) or few crates to either 'amil retailers, individual buyers, or brokers and mediators (dãllala). Most of the purchases were daily or weekly needs and were most frequently fulfilled via economic market transaction rather than subsistence production. Consequently, with the evolvement of this market environment, a dyadic pattern developed for material-need fulfillment. During the time of research Asmära urbanitãtes very much depended on these supply lines for any basic foodstuffs, and entry into this 'common market' required knowledge of market structures and distribution networks.

As important commercial centres and daily or weekly marketing places, the market and its adjacent shops served as a foci for social and economic interactions, had a significant influence on the convergence of traders and customers bound by 'amil relationships, and a far-reaching effect on the social and economic conditions of their surroundings. Schwimmer (1979) made a similar observation for a West African case where the marketplace, the physical location of economic arrangements, was the area where the cultural baggage was most evident. As a theatre of commerce, the kätäma Asmära market acted as a centre for the dispersal of social and technological change and as a focus of activities, exchanges and social contacts, it underscored not only the level of technology, the economic needs, the social values, the religious ideals and the aesthetic tastes of the people but it also reflected the political crisis and economic malaise of the times.

Kätäma Asmära market shops were large or small open-front dukkwans with wall shelves stocked with easily visible variety of vendible objects. Stalls and workshops together with their trade and crafts were spatially integrated and in the market, as noted by Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) elsewhere, individuals were organized around the sale of a commodity. Traders selling the same commodity to 'amil customers formed a moral community because they provided the same services and shared similar commercial values and were bound by commitment to a particular type of activity. Since their stalls were near each other, they exchanged greetings, shared gossip and jokes, passed (sotto voce) to each other clandestine information about war-front developments, and facilitated each other's correct changes (šārf'ī). Here, the Muslim-owned shop was not only an institution of bazaar economy, but also a religious lodge where hadrah ('prayer') sessions and other spiritual ceremonies were conducted.
Given the open lay out of the market, the major limit to the flow of mutual information was physical presence. Visual inspection readily revealed the vista of the shops, the amount of goods and the number of buyers and sellers available even to casual market visitors. In most cases, those engaged in business could easily overhear the prices bargained by adjacent traders and see the identity of their ‘amil customers. Whether hoarding and concealment of goods and transactions took place outside the market setting is something I did not explore.13

Using skilled and scrupulous business techniques, traders calculated the best means of influencing ‘amil customers, drove hard bargains and concerned themselves a great deal with avoiding losses. High levels of price information resulted in high levels of uniform prices within a given market location. Bargaining (waga ‘edage) was indeed the primary technique for establishing the value of goods among traders and customers connected by dyadic relations. Paying too high a price was a matter of scorn, not pity, as it indicated ignorance and naiveté. To the ‘amil customer who considered himself or herself skilled at price setting, each marketing trip became a series of jousts in which the object was not only to buy at a low price but to defeat one’s opponent in the haggle. Although traders believed that a veneer of politeness and subservience to ‘amil customers indicated good business under conditions of political instability and economic uncertainty where traders and their ‘amil customers had only limited knowledge of the market, where they were dealing with irregular and non-standardized goods, in other words, where true value was difficult to establish, haggling was a rational vehicle for price fixing. Bargaining tended to break down whenever standardization of goods, brand certifications, knowledge of markets, standard measures, social attitudes, politico-economic climates, or cultural conditions changed.14

13. According to some consultants the Asmära marketplace saw much small-scale smuggling and black marketeering during the period of my field research. The main commodities that flowed in from across the Sudanese border and from the other side of the Red Sea coast included simple manufactured items and household consumption goods such as soap, candles, kerosene, matches, tobacco, batteries, sugar, leather goods, cotton goods, radios, tape recorders and watches, and packaged foodstuff consisting of flour, honey, instant coffee and powdered milk which the Ethiopian state and economy was having difficulty providing to Asmära and other urban centres in Eritrea. In agreement with both HANSEN (1989) and MBILINYI (1989), I argue that such practices and activities arise from unstable and uncertain political conditions, and from shortage and fluctuations in the availability of goods that severely limit the economic opportunities of traders and customers. Indeed recurring shortages of basic necessities had made illicit trade part of the ongoing contestations concerning the struggle for survival and means of living. For an approach that accounts for the interactive roles of state policy and local cultural practices during economic crisis, vide CHAZAN (1989).

14. Data for the whole process of establishing the value of goods was drawn from a survey of a twenty percent sample of traders and customers buying and selling
Some ‘amil oriented traders operating in this marketplace were professional middlemen merchants (dallala) buying in order to sell and make profit and rarely selling their own products. Trade was their primary and, in most cases, only occupation. Market traders connected to customers by ‘amil relationships were both men and women, although only men traded in certain commodities. Most traders specialized in retail functions of only one type of commodity and were responsible for the bulk of internal distribution of such goods to ‘amil customers. However, traders did cooperate with one another in some ways. Occasionally, several traders pooled resources to buy large quantities of goods, then divided them into individual lots for resale purposes. Young novice traders received apprenticeship under the auspices of their fathers or mothers, and some were bound to start up their own business later on in their lives.

Marketplaces of traditional economies involving dyadic relations have enjoyed a reputation as institutions that freed women from the sexual discrimination and gender inequality found in other social contexts (Swetnam 1988). Within these personalized trade networks the popular image on several market days. The prevalence of such trading relationships and strategies were identified and investigated with systematic interviewing of buyers and sellers of all commodities in the market. Repeated economic and political crisis did not hinder observation and sotto voce discussion of sensitive topics and painful choices. Prices were recorded for the goods and an estimate of the retail value of the total inventory was made at those rates. For an extended discussion on the whole question of price negotiation and market transaction, vide the most interesting work of Alexander (1987).

This is a common phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa. Processed foodstuffs and condiments trading, vegetable marketing and dairy and milk products selling are by and large women’s engagements. The trade in grain crops and livestock pertains to men’s market prerogatives. As heads of families it is expected that men marketeers sell products that result in the largest possible incomes. Discussions of such gender-based divisions of labour in the marketplace are revealed, among others, in the works of Davis (1973) and Bab (1989). At a different level, Maher (1981) discusses a similar representation of the roles of men and women in commercial operation.

One of the main reasons for the continuing predominance of retail trade in the Asmara marketplace is the stability of traders’ commercial involvements and their ability to transmit business techniques to their sons and daughters. In the apprenticeship system a boy or a girl usually starts trading by helping his or her father or mother, or still a closer or more distant relative. If a father wants his son to learn another trade, or feels that someone else would be a better teacher, he might give his son to a friend or relative for training. In a sample of fifty-eight traders, forty-eight percent had received instruction from their fathers in the commercial occupation which they pursued, fifteen percent from other relatives, and ten percent from non-relatives; the rest were self-taught. There was no significant variation by age group, but informal apprenticeship was far more common, where boys and girls were taught the techniques of trade by imitation and verbal instruction. Coy’s (1989) edited book presents an interesting theoretical and methodological examination of the phenomenon of apprenticeship by exploring it as a social, economic, and educational institution.
of market women was one of power and independence which in many cases accompanied financial insurance. Men traders described such women as meticulous merchants in commercial circles facilitated by 'amil ties. Some Asmāra market women were in fact believed to be 'matriarchs' whose merchant muscles headed family households of unmarried sons and daughters, and spent whatever possible on the improvement of their trades.\(^{17}\) Marketplace trading has thus remained a vital resource for women increasingly squeezed by shrinking family incomes and reduced opportunities in other sectors. Like the powerful Accra market women (Robertson 1974; Schwimmer 1979), the assertiveness of these women traders found its public expression in the ways in which they dealt with customers connected to them by 'amil relationships. When business was brisk they frequently shouted at peasant producers, waved money in their faces, and might even simply force the money into their hands and begin pulling the produce away before the peasant producer had agreed to a price. The producer's response to this brow-beating was stolid and submissive: the seller simply repeated his selling prices. In the absence of efficient market information system, women traders within 'amil ties could exaggerate market conditions in an effort to reduce producer prices and protect capital reserves. When producers found prices unexpectedly low, they cruised around the market in solemn silence. When selling on a retail level, voluble market women who are normally at ease in a public place call out 'amil customers and feel free to either laugh loudly and banter or gossip with them about political and economic conditions.\(^{18}\) In sum, women traders had an aggressive entrepreneurial spirit and sizeable supports from their neighbours.

\(^{17}\) Women predominated in the Asmāra marketplace because they had fewer options than men for contributing to family support and because selling offered a unique opportunity to integrate income-generating activity outside the home with domestic responsibilities. In general, market women had some control over their hours of work and over the products they sold. Many were able to bring market work home and household work to the market, taking advantage of flexible conditions in order to carry out all the work in their busy days. Indeed, as BABB (1989) noted, marketing was sometimes regarded as an extension of women's work at home. In addition to the work of locating, transporting, sorting, and safeguarding items for sale, women traders often processed their goods and took care of their children to meet family needs.

\(^{18}\) As SUDARKASA (1973) noted, in no other field do ideas about the activities of women contrast more vividly than in the case of market trade. Marketing facilitated women's interpersonal communication by which information and news was disseminated and shared concerning kinsmen and friends, and war-front events and developments. The women's market network gave them a base of support and enabled them to organize quickly in the marketplace. Marketeers rarely question many of the aspects of social organization that draw the attention of outside observers, viewing them as customary and unnoteworthy. Consequently, for the ethnographer interested in market organization, it is often easier to record observations than to elicit the opinions of marketeers themselves.
Although the people who interacted in 'edaga or šuq belonged to different denominations, came from different regions, were members of diverse gender groups, and possessed different economic interests, they generally completed their transaction successfully and had good relations with one another based on 'amil ties. Yet some quarrels flared up over stolen sidewalk spaces, or use of inaccurate weights and measures in determining the value of goods. Apart from actual fist fights, one could also see some signs of marketeers’ conflict-laden faces displaying inflamed and angry looks. Customers connected to traders by 'amil relationships sometimes put on their worst scowl, shouted for the price of an item, scoffed when they heard it and, if interested, paused to bargain or negotiate. Traders donned a stony face to indicate that they would not budge an inch on the price they were quoting. If contradicted by a customer, they would resort easily to shouting in order to convince the other of the truth of what they were saying.¹⁹

During 'amil based transactions some buyers and sellers made use of a ‘market language’. This market argot, which sellers used to attract customers and buyers employed to strike good bargains, consisted of words, gestures, symbols or jokes drawn from Tegreña, and sometimes from Arabic and Italian. It facilitated commercial transactions and meaningful and intelligible communication between traders and clients tied by 'amil relationships. It was not a language in the sense that Tegreña or Tegrä is, but was a language nonetheless in that it communicated ideas which could be mutually understood by the buyers and sellers involved. In this sense, the market language was specific and peculiar to individuals connected by dyadic networks. There was no general format or vocabulary which everyone knew rather each person developed his own vernacular through trails and errors. This neutralized the ground for conflict and disputes even before haggling or bargaining started, and the market language became a mechanism of tension management that further facilitated 'amil-based transactional involvement between traders and customers. In this connection the käïama Asmära marketplace served functions concerned with interpersonal communication by which information and news were disseminated and shared among men and women regarding kinsmen, friends, and events and developments concerning the overall politico-military condition. A new vocabulary had been created not only to escape brutal police investigation and para-military detection but also to cloud and confide war-front information from reaching Ethiopian government camps. Such symbolic statements had given way to the pragmatics of menacing moments.

¹⁹ Such conflictual conditions of market settings have also been reported in the recent ethnographies of FINAN (1988) and SWETNAM (1988).
Notion of ‘Amil Relation

‘Amil relations referred to both regular customers and suppliers, describing their specific tasks with regards to the selling and buying of certain goods and services from the same market traders. Linguistically, the Arabic term ‘amil roughly means ‘regular customer’, but with much heavier connotations of obligation than the English phrase permits. The word ‘amil denotes the relationship itself, as well as both parties to it. Thus, a trader referred to both his suppliers and buyers—including other traders, individual producers and retail customers—as ‘amawwil (plural).20 These social and economic relationships shaped and permeated the transactions of buyers and sellers, and the market mentality of such relationships comprised a form of interaction that was socially recognized, long-lasting, and entailed mutual responsibility. Beyond the cooperative groups (mah-ḩār) and rotating credit associations (eqqub)21 formed by traders operating at the same level of trade, the notion of ‘amil was thus a major institutional mechanism which linked buyers and sellers, personalized economic transactions and maximized trust between traders and customers in the marketplace.

In such a market situation, traders’ and customers’ obligations were mutual but not identical. The dyadic relations functioned as an implicit agreement between sellers and buyers. The latter bought only from their ‘amil sellers even when competing sellers offered slightly less prices. In return for this loyalty, sellers might extend credit (leqah) to meet immediate cash needs of their customers, or might partially finance their production costs to avert and offset the loss of their capital resources. On one hand, the relationship was exclusive, with the buyer or supplier dealing only with her customer whenever he or she comes to the market. On the other hand, the resident trader must be prepared to buy or sell whenever his or her customer appeared in the market. The existence, form and social content of the relationships varied according to the type of commodity being sold, the level of trade and the source of supply. The content of such relationships ranged from little or no social contact to multiple ties involving frequent interaction. Further, the granting of credit, often considered a major part of regular customer relationships, varied independently of ‘amil ties.

These reciprocal relationships were minimally built on mutual trust, but in many cases were further sanctioned through personal friendship,

20. Earlier studies of personalized economic relationships in a variety of cultural contexts have emphasized the role of these relationships in the establishment of trust and the reduction of risks. Although ‘amil ties in the Asmāra marketplace had similar functions, this paper considers the socioeconomic contexts and political conditions under which these ties operated.

kinship, or other social bonds that complement economic interaction. Such relationships were fully institutionalized within society and explicitly recognized by all market participants. The internal logic of reciprocal relationships generated the economy in a competitive environment of capital scarcity, provided anti-risk mechanisms useful in trading where there were no public channels of information about supply and demand, sanctioned strategies for market chain integration from supplier to retailer to customer, and promoted informal ways to stabilize commercial transactions during volatile and uncertain political conditions.

Unlike patron/client relationship where there is a potential for exploitation and subordination, personalized dyadic commercial ties between buyers and sellers governed transactions, moderated the effects of rapid price fluctuations in a troubled and deteriorating economy where many customers had little ready cash for transaction, enhanced credit to support higher purchasing power in glut periods or during shortages, and encouraged some coordination of sale of products during turbulent times. These relations, which usually involved flexible and negotiable mutual obligations, also encouraged steadier turnovers, coordination of deliveries and accumulation of capital resources. The existence of dyadic relations kept traders and customers insulated from each other’s losses and the presence of such elastic arrangements permitted rapid revival of market institutions and stabilization of supply levels, and enhanced the predictability of flow of products and transaction of goods during political and economic crises. Traders closely followed the production patterns of their suppliers, often provided market advice about consumer preferences, and by adjusting prices for products they partly shared their steady producer suppliers’ potential or real misfortunes caused by price fluctuations. Only in the context of close ‘amil ties would a producer be willing to deliver her/his product without a settled price and arrangement of full payment.

Payment defaults sometimes broke the ‘amil relationship. Since most transactions were rarely recorded, no legal recourse existed for unrecovered debts (‘edaitat). Hence the major defence against payment default involved the careful selection of customers. The presence of luck notwithstanding, the secret to success in the market business was perseverance. If market participants were able to survive the setbacks caused by a time of terror and maintain the flow of products through ‘amil ties, market risks became more manageable and controllable through long term exchange of credits and replenishment of loss of capital reserves amongst themselves. Before the war ‘amil relations were based on the immediate returns of credits and loans, but during the war customers secured extended payment arrangements. It was critical to risk management that sellers maintained a constant source of supply, steady buyers, and the necessary capital to

22. TRAGER (1981), following MINTZ (1961), defines these relationships as basic economic alliances.
cover transactions. The ‘amil relationship provided a major instrument to achieve this continuity and to reduce market economic uncertainty.

Asmära city customers, whether as relatives, neighbours, friends, or hometown folks, took part in transactions of complex enterprises that involved coordination of decisions about precarious business operations involving credit or other concessions. Regular buyers often paid on their next buying visit, clearing the old account and taking the new goods on credit. A customer relation in this context normally began with cash purchases on an established schedule. The buyer then asked for partial credit to increase the scale of purchases or when prices went up seasonally. Credit was extended to customers on the basis of regular buying habits and outstanding credit payment history, and high levels of information between traders and customers governed credit with considerable efficiency. In case of trouble debtors were intercepted and harassed, and informal sanctions could also have considerable effect in penalizing persistent defaulters. Except for actual debts, obligations to customers could not be enforced, but either party could break off the relationship if not satisfied.

In most cases, cheating or deception on quality of goods did not occur. Prices offered followed current price levels with minimal haggling. This reduced time spent on inspection of goods, price comparison and risk of bad bargaining. Seemingly trivial services, for example, storing customers’ purchases while they shopped or having them carried to a cart (‘arabīya) or a horse driven two-wheeled cart (carrózza), could be important in reducing or preventing losses and costs. Customers could also ask for extra credit to recover from temporary family or personal disasters or still from slower seasons. Similarly peasant producers advanced farm goods on credit to traders during the glut season, collecting payment after resale completions, and traders in turn advanced money to peasants for harvest expenses. The majority of käfāma Asmära market traders operated at such low capital levels that relatively minor incidents could put them out of business. Through ‘amil-based gift exchanges, price reductions and credit extensions, buyers and sellers with low capital reserves survived crises times better than low capital traders and customers outside dyadic relations.

Traders engaged in the sale of the same commodity carried some commercial advantages. Colleagues could trust each other to conform to bargaining etiquette and streamlining transactions. They knew that others will, in the Maussian tradition (1967), reciprocate favours and pass on helpful information to reduce risk at all costs. Market retailers took messages and placated customers for each other, extended credit to one another, watched each others’ goods, facilitated the correct change of cash (şārfi) among themselves, and coordinated ways of dealing with commercial crises. Traders who habitually made the same type of transaction in the same location became known to each other and to other members
in those transactions. Buyers did not shift from one seller to another in response to price changes, because the Asmāra market itself was organized more on strong dyadic principles of reciprocity rather than on impersonal exchange of goods for money. Hence ‘amīl linkages and bonds were in themselves not only a response to existing difficult times, but also a glue in which economic transactions were set within social contexts. The same glue also enhanced the complex socioeconomic arrangements among market participants and facilitated the maintenance of the flow of products and information networks under uncertain political conditions.

In such bazaar economies price and quantity alone did not predict market behaviour. Studies (Plattner 1983) show that economic and social objectives were often intermingled, or that buyers and sellers commonly employed strategies of a social content to achieve their economic intent. Often these ‘amīl strategies involved implicit, noncontractual agreements between buyers and sellers, and long-term steady and exclusive market-related obligations were preferable to short-term price maximization. These long-lasting partnerships were based on balanced reciprocity and maintained by continuing social obligations that became more intense when the outcomes of market transactions were at high risk due to disturbing sociopolitical conditions. In the main market of kāṭāma Asmāra, such trader/customer relations sometimes lasted for generations, stabilized interactions of market participants and protected them from the dangers of uncertain economic conditions.

By and large, ‘amīl relationships were strategies and mutual agreements that Asmāra market participants developed to mitigate and neutralize the many risks inherent in volatile political conditions and uncertain economic times facing traders and customers as well as other city residents. These relations were realized through protection of critical capital reserves, reduction in prices, extension of loans and credits, and handling costs of payment defaults. The substance of an ‘amīl relationship was, however, drawn from the social context and sanctioned through idioms of obligation and reciprocity rather than impersonal exchange of goods and services for money. In its essence, the Asmāra market environment and its ‘amīl linkages were a social analogue of all the other relationships that made up the social networks of market participants, and these social mechanisms enhanced the different market channels and scope of schedules necessary for calculating market margins, and promoted individual survival during tough times. I, therefore, think that the existence of ‘amīl relationships in the main market of kāṭāma Asmāra, and to some extent, the form of those relationships, could be better explained by examining the nature of the political culture and scope of economic constraints created by coercive contexts. How did city traders in their own ways, then, interact with the rural hinterlands, with the exigencies of local economy and ecology, and with the political configuration of civil conflict, and what were the dyadic threads that stitched together the responses to the web of war?
Dyadic Ties During War Times

Although many traders and customers used 'amil ties to make sense of uncertain economic conditions, their descriptions of daily life in the market of kätäma Asmära or the surrounding city environment were still reminiscent of a war blitz. They spoke of constant sounds of near and distant guns and bombs. Their children knew all kinds of rockets and artillery ballistics as well as timing of shellings. Traders and customers having 'amil relationships and residing in city outskirts told stories of moving to shelters and bunkers, usually the lowest floors of houses, when shelling starts. They spoke of experiences manifesting stomach aches and panics when surroundings were showered with a staccato of bullets. When describing bombardments, many referred to their fear for family members not with them during those moments. Stories such as these were told so often in the interviews that I suspect they were typical of those times. The expectancy of something terrible happening was more harmful to the psyche than the events themselves. This then was the common lot of traders and customers connected by 'amil ties in a city confronting destruction and possible annihilation of its entire population.23

Trader and customer families gave their members love and comfort, but little security from life behind bars and city police death gangs. The greatest fear was losing entire families rather than individual members. The family gave life meaning in the community outside 'amil related activity. Trader and customer parents spoke of the frustration they felt when they could not send their children to school, and very often they were struggling just to feed them. The middle and secondary school student population had been declining drastically during the last two decades. All adolescents interviewed lived with their families of orientation, many took care of siblings and there was no mention about conflict or complaints concerning any family restrictions. For these youths, adolescence was not a period of rebellion but a time for showing concern for the brethren. To escape possible incrimination and subsequent incarceration without pardons or paroles, entire families of traders and customers opted for emigration (seddürt) across borders. The Ethiopian government’s intentional transfer of Eritrean personnel and workers from various Asmära bureaucracies and factories to places outside Eritrea all the more took away husbands and sons and left behind wives and daughters. This state of affairs disrupted family functions and depleted its source of subsistence, denied traders of their potential customers, and thus threatened the very threshold of 'amil networks.

23 For a similar description of how people caught up in crisis times confer meaning on the events of their lives in the midst of war, vide ASSAL & FARRELL (1992). The fact that Asmära did not become another Berlin, Beyrouth, Saigon or Sarajevo is a result of the successful siege strategy of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front.
Chronic transport problems choked the market system of traders and customers who depended on the traffic of reliable goods and services facilitated by ‘amil ties. Motor vehicles could not be repaired or replaced, and this led to frequent breakdowns en route to destinations which resulted in long lines of defunct automobiles snaking sidewalks of empty garages. Acute shortages of petrol, many a time, brought travel to a virtual halt. Local factories produced at a very minimal percentage of their capacity due to lack of imported spare parts, raw materials and energy sources. Episodic enforcement of price controls on grains, legumes, and other foodstuffs led to the arrests, confiscations, beatings and market stand demolition of traders and their peasant suppliers.\textsuperscript{24} Moreover, climatic variations, compounded by bombardments involving chemical explosives, led to memorable droughts and food shortages in traders’ and customers’ households.\textsuperscript{25} During these times goods flowed into this market from surrounding (käbabi) villages and hamlets with great difficulty. Peasants and their products on their way to the city were frisked and searched in innumerable Ethiopian military checkpoints; goods were many a times confiscated and bribes were taken as a matter of course. The depth and complexity of kätäma Asmära’s economic crises challenged its commercial institutions at the most basic level, shattered confidence in the Ethiopian currency, and made it difficult for traders to invest rationally and plan business ventures strategically. The city was literally strangled because of urban infrastructural problems, and its traders and customers witnessed the demise of cultural landmarks that were once the fabric of a past rich in commercial engagements. Yet such disturbed market circumstances were made manageable and tolerable through ‘amil relationships involving gifts and prestations.

To challenge the crisis in the absence of concurrent choices traders and customers, as well as other city inhabitants, developed a complex division of labour and ingenious strategies. This rapid response was part of the traders’ and customers’ ability to adapt to the drastic and recurrent shocks that disrupted the socioeconomic structure due to political and economic constraints. Horse powered ‘way-west’-type wagons and canvas-covered carts became cab or taxi limousines and mini-bus coaches; neighbourhood children of traders and customers fetched water, hawked goods and shopped family groceries using roller skates; and women ven-

\textsuperscript{24} I owe these points to several trader consultants who initially were very reluctant to share their secrets with strangers.

\textsuperscript{25} The chronic problems of food shortage and starvation which made Eritrea one of the most famine-prone regions in the Horn of Africa during the last quarter of the twentieth century deserve a special attention and thorough examination. Both drought and war with Ethiopia claimed thousands of human and livestock lives for three decades. Readings and references about Ethio-Eritrean confrontations, rain shortages and crop failures are available in several works concerning war and famine in these regions. But it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with such sources.
endors engaged in mobile ‘tea rooms’ and selling low-priced cooked foods mushroomed in almost every corner of city streets. Constrained economic settings were in one way or another made more bearable and controllable through a system of tightened ‘amil networks that mitigated financial tensions and lubricated interpersonal relations on the basis of long-term loans, credits, concessions, and commodity price reductions among buyers and sellers. In a way, life was perfectly normal as social and cultural events as well as commercial interactions continued to be conducted. Birthdays and other personal holidays were observed, weddings were celebrated, and funerals were well attended. Sisters, wives, and daughters visited and nourished brothers, husbands and sons locked and languishing at notorious incarceration centres. But this comes as no surprise because traders and customers and all kätäma Asmara residents were in one way or another either captives of endless curfew hours and blackouts or prisoners of fear within city security limits; and those who were able to stroll from place-to-place to conduct transactions, to do errands or deliver messages had still to be reminded of restriction of movement by barbed wires, sand sacks and other symbolic walls that sometimes fenced entire city blocks, avenues and alleys.

Children of traders and customers were not strangers to these difficult moments; they played mock war games that involved siege tactics, building barricades, and use of toy machine guns and grenades. Playing war games is not simply recreation but also an expression of stressful social conditions (Macksoud 1992). They played in their spare time but their parents were bored all the time. Those of us who live in normal circumstances may wonder why people get bored when there is a constant struggle for survival during difficult times. Boredom is a socially constructed state that emanates from inactive lifestyles and stressful, suffocating surroundings (Sparks 1995). Many trader and customer consultants spoke of a deep state of boredom aggravated by depleted economic resources, endless city curfews and closure of entertainment centres. Unemployment was rampant, while jobs and careers became insecure or unthinkable. In this kind of economic environment, ‘amil ties and the associated processes of credit and other monetary advances among traders and customers eased the tension caused by the scarcity of flow of cash resources and created an ambiance of financial tolerance.

During this period of war, traders and customers as well as other city residents involved in dyadic relationships showed great enthusiasm in visiting each other. Visits (mebšah)—whether daily drop-ins, formal social calls, family get-togethers or visits during calendarical holidays and life-cycle ceremonies—demanded extensive time investments. For most male traders and customers visiting was their primary activity in spare hours. For some this activity was recreation against the odds of deteriorating political conditions or a time for sharing and updating information about recent developments in the struggle of national liberation, for others
it was sheer social obligation based on ‘amil relations. Among married or widowed female traders and customers, who incidentally had tighter ‘amil networks than males, visiting was predominant during their leisure hours when they took turns in inviting one another for coffee drinking ceremonies. If a customer unexpectedly visited the house of a trader, the host, rather than feel inconvenienced would, on the contrary, feel honoured. Traders and customers connected by ‘amil ties visited each other for every reason and every trivial thing. Visits involving ‘amil networks thus bore cultural and emotional meaning for those engaged in trading during a time of economic depression.26

The war had a life of its own that sustained itself by cycles of terror. It destroyed the economic system and the depressed financial situation created large numbers of disillusioned buyers and sellers and other city residents. Yet despite all kinds of inconveniences, insecurities and food shortages, traders were in harmony with themselves and their customers through ‘amil ties. Although war and the ongoing problem of staying alive prohibited them from thinking about a future at all, they were still consoled by the concepts of tâsfa (‘hope’) and harârta (‘desire’) of national liberation, and a future free from political frustration and economic stagnation.27 This was enhanced by dyadic relationships which brought order to the catalogue of chaos of their commercial lives. It structured their days and tasks, and not only had calming and coping effects on war moments but also helped in envisioning a meaningful existence in the economic and social sense.

26. Social visitation was an obligation and people were practically forced to participate in all visits involving birth, circumcision, marriage, illness, death, weekly or yearly saintly days, success in careers, departure or arrival from travels etc. These visitations involved fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, half brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, cousins, blood relatives and affines, friends and neighbours, etc.; and they were all socially connected to each other. In this way the social network involved a large number of peoples whose visits were not merely social as they implied the fulfillment of duties that were also obligatory. During social visitations some shared things of common experience and interest; others discussed family and political matters; still others elicited sotto voce specific information about the war front from amongst themselves. The exchange of symbolic goods such as visits reinforced relations among close and distant kin, strengthened social ties among non-relatives, emulated grit and perseverance (nilh or habbo) among traders and customers, eased political tension and provided married women not only access to resources close to men but also networks that connected them with friends and neighbours beyond household relatives. For insights on visits as a cultural phenomenon I am particularly indebted to the work by ASWAD (1974).

27. To this effect there was hardly any Eritrean family that had not enlisted a son or a daughter in the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front by the late 1980s.
Market activities and the concomitant commercial experiences have always been important for traders and customers and other kätäma Asmära residents and käbabī inhabitants in both economic and social terms. Marketing was and still is a special activity consisting of some content of emotional involvement and an occasion not strictly of the workaday world. It was part entertainment and part social event. A trip to the market furnished some measure of leisure and pleasure and an adventure to bazaar culture. Like any other sub-Saharan African markets, it also provided the ambiance for the recruitment of women and men as marital and sexual partners, and for women engaged in domestic drudgery it was a glimpse of the outside environment.

The Asmära market organization consisted of personalized exchange networks in which the social content of relationships was and still is fundamental. These networks involved traders and customers, most of whom were bound to each other by ‘amil ties that were critically social and largely obligational. Voluntary relationships with non-kin became important where access to scarce information, profitable or protective social relations, credit or prestations, and other facilities and services were necessary but could not be ensured within kin networks. Such dyadic relations usually involved more flexible and negotiable mutual obligations with strangers than relations with kin or partners. For example, traders were not responsible for debts or losses incurred by customers, while they had to cover losses incurred by kin and partners. This mode of internal trade operation, far from disrupting supplies, prevented interruptions in the flow of foodstuffs to city urbanites when political or economic conditions changed, decentralized risk in the marketplace, and improved the capacity of the market system to buffer or insulate producers and consumers from absolute control by these same institutions. Dyadic ties in kätäma Asmära marketplace did not permit traders to exploit customers crippled by chaotic economic circumstances, instead ‘amil relationships exchanged between individual enterprises enabled buyers and sellers to survive political and economic calamities at personal and societal levels and protected them from the edge of direct financial disasters. Historical changes in the progress of the Ethio-Eritrean war and the patterns of personalized relations between traders and customers during these periods show that dyadic ties played important roles in mediating major socioeconomic shifts caused by uncertain political times.

Earlier studies of economic personalism and bazaar commercialism stress the role of these relationships in the establishment of trust and the reduction of risks in a variety of cultural contexts. Although it is clear that ‘amil ties in kätäma Asmära marketplace had similar functions, the present essay departs from this debate and considers the political and socioeconomic conditions within which these ties flourish and emanate. In examining such relationships, it not only underscores that the social content is fundamental, but that the basis of the ties is also economic and
political. It is therefore suggested that the existence of ‘amil ties in certain commercial contexts, and to some extent the form of those relationships, can be explained by the political and economic constraints within which trade operated. Even if it is true that dyadic relationships in kätáma Asmāra marketing systems were grounded in the special importance of reciprocal exchanges, interpersonal networks, and the extension of short- or long-term credits and loans, there is a great deal of evidence that suggests that their significance originates from relationships that concretize and contextualize political and economic crises. Since the relevance of personalized relations and the internal marketing system within which they operated seem to attract most attention in situations that alleviate political tensions and economic depression, it is useful to explain the existence of ‘amil relationships within the context of constraints produced by the disintegration of commercial patterns due to turbulent times.

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This essay examines the significance of dyadic relationships between buyers and sellers during both peace and war times, and describes how war events affect the process of peace time dyadic trade relations. It suggests that these relationships prevail not so much in all areas of commercial encounters, but rather in those disturbed by specific social and economic settings. In looking at how market participants use these relationships to make sense of unstable political and economic conditions, this paper lays out the material context within which these social relations exist, presents descriptive and analytic data on market people contending with both the terror of an ongoing war and its immediate dangers, examines how traders and customers attempt to confer meaning on the events of their lives during difficult moments, and investigates how dyadic bonds ease socioeconomic exchange under war conditions.

Résumé

Cet article étudie la signification des relations dyadiques entre acheteurs et vendeurs au cours des périodes de guerre et de paix, et évalue l’impact de la guerre sur les relations commerciales dyadiques du temps de paix. Il révèle que ce type de relations loin d’englober l’ensemble de la vie commerciale ne concerne que certains dispositifs économiques et sociaux bien délimités. En examinant la façon dont ceux qui fréquentent le marché utilisent ces relations pour pallier l’instabilité de la situation économique et politique, l’auteur décrit les conditions concrètes de l’efficacité de ces relations. Il montre également la façon dont les vendeurs et les acheteurs sont confrontés à la guerre et à ses dangers immédiats, et examine la manière dont les marchands et les clients tentent de conférer un sens aux difficultés de leur vie quotidienne. Il met enfin l’accent sur le rôle facilitateur de ces relations dyadiques dans les échanges commerciaux en période de guerre.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Eritrea/Erythrée, Asmara/Asmara, personalized trade relation/relation marchande personnalisée, bazaar economy/économie de bazar, trader-customer relationship/relation client-marchand.